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*The Duty of a good Minister with
respect to himself and his Flock :*

Briefly Considered in a

S E R M O N

Preach'd at the

V I S I T A T I O N

A T

B E D F O R D.

April the 22d. 1707.

By ROBERT LIGHTFOOT, B.D.

Rector of Odel.

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A C T S XX.

The former part of Verse 28.

*Take heed therefore unto your selves,
and to all the flock.*

THese Words are part of that most excellent and affectionate Discourse which St. Paul made to the *Clergy* of *Ephesus*, when he was about to take (as he seems to intimate) his last leave of them. In the Verses going before, the Apostle lays before them his own Example; wherein they might discern all the Marks and Characters of a Faithful Pastor. 1st. An ardent zeal for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom, which no prospect of Dangers could abate or lessen, *ver. 22, 23, and 24.* 2^{dly}, As a consequence of this Zeal, an indefatigable industry in propagating the Gospel, *ver. 20. and 3^{dly}.* A great Sincerity in the discharge of his whole Ministry among them, of which he was so confident, that he appeals to themselves

as Witnesſes of it, *ver. 26. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the Blood of all Men.* The Apoſtle having premised theſe things, proceeds in the Words of my Text to exhort them very ſeriously to a faithful diſcharge of their Duty, *Take heed therefore unto your ſelves, and to all the Flock.* The Text is a Conſequence, which if it be referr'd to the preceeding Diſcourſe, the Apoſtle's argument may run thus: You ſee what great pains I have taken among you to fit you for the Miniſtry, both by my *Inſtruction* and *Example*, *take heed therefore*; for it will be a great aggravation of your Guilt, if notwithſtanding the advantages you have had from me, you ſhould fall ſhort of your Duty. But if it be referr'd to what immediately follows, (as fairly it may) then it contains an earneſt perſuaſion to Carefulneſs, grounded upon the foreſight of the approaching Danger the Church would be in from its Enemies after his departure. *Therefore take heed*, ſaith the Apoſtle, *becauſe I know that after my departure, ſhall grievous Wolves enter in among you. Alſo of your own ſelves ſhall Men ariſe ſpeaking perverſe things.*

In treating upon the words, I shall
1st. consider the Persons to whom the
 Exhortation is made. *2^{dly}*. The subject
 matter of it: And *Lastly*, I shall beg
 leave to make an Application suitable to
 this Audience.

First, I shall consider the Persons to
 whom the Exhortation is made. That
 they were the *Clergy*; that is, Men pecu-
 liarly set a-part by the Holy Ghost for
 the Office of the Ministry, is evident
 from the Words immediately following
 my Text; but of what Order, is not easie
 to determine, because the Apostle calls
 them by different names. Just after *the*
Text, they are stiled Overseers, or Bishops,
 as the word is usually render'd in other
 places. And in the *17 ver.* they are cal-
 led Presbyters or Priests; but whether
 they were Bishops only, or Priests only,
 or Bishops and Priests together, cannot
 certainly be known. Their being called
 Elders or Priests in the *17 ver.* doth not
 prove that they were all of that inferi-
 our rank, which we now commonly call
 Priests; and distinguish them from that
 Higher Order in the Church, which we
 call Bishops: I say, their being called El-
 ders

ders doth not prove this, because that word is of a much wider signification in Scripture, and we find it sometimes ascribed to the Apostles themselves, who certainly were of greater Power, and Dignity than a Common Presbyter. Nor, on the other hand, can we certainly conclude they were all Bishops properly speaking, because they are said to be Overseers or Bishops of Christ's Flock. For the word Overseer, in a subordinate and limited sense doth as properly belong to the Priest, as to the Bishop. He is in subordination to the Bishop as truly an Overseer of that part of Christ's Flock, which is committed to his charge, as the Bishop is over his Diocese. But as we are not able certainly to determine this, so neither is it very material to do it; we are at liberty to abound in our own Sense, and may differ in our Opinions concerning it, without either hurt to Religion, or the breach of Peace and Charity among ourselves. The more probable Opinion seems to be this, that the Apostle's Audience was made up both of Priests and Bishops. But that which is of much greater consequence, and which I cannot pass over without taking notice of, is, That
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some from this place and others of the like nature have endeavour'd to draw an Argument, to maintain an Errour of high Importance, from whence have flow'd Divisions and Animosities among us, to the reproach of the Reformation, and to the great hindrance of true Piety and Charity. For from this place and some others where the names of Presbyter and Bishop are given to the same Persons, some would conclude, that the Order and Office of a Bishop and Presbyter are the same, and that there is no distinction of the one from the other. But how plausible so ever this way of arguing may seem to some, whose Cause it serves, yet it is very deceitful in it self ; and, if we follow it whither it would lead us, will bring us into gross Errours. Let us make tryal of it in another Case of the like Nature. The great *Apostle St. Paul* is also called a *Deacon* in Scriptures, as *1 Cor. 3. ver. 5. Who then is Paul and who is Apollos, but Deacons by whom ye believed?* 'Tis true we render the word, *Ministers* in our Translation, because the word *Deacon* is now in an especial manner appropriated to an inferiour Order of Men in the Church, but it is *Deacons* in the Original. Now will any one from
hence

hence conclude, that the Office of an Apostle and Deacon were the same? This our Adversaries will not do, notwithstanding the words are undeniably applied to the same Person; which shews they allow this Argument to have no force any further than it serves their own Turn. Nothing then can be concluded barely from the promiscuous use of these Names in Scripture; and so St. *Chrysostom* thought, as appears from a most remarkable Place in his Comment on *Phil. i. ver. i.* *Paul to all the Saints that are at Philippi, with the Bishops and Deacons.* What is this? saith he, Were there many Bishops of one City? By no means; but he calls the Presbyters so; for then these Names were used in common, and a Bishop was called a Deacon. In which words of St. *Chrysostom*, we are plainly taught these two things, *1st*. The confusion of Names that was in the Apostles time; sometimes Presbyters were called Bishops, and Bishops were called Deacons. *2^{dly}*. The distinction of the Offices, notwithstanding this confusion of Names; for not only a Bishop and a Deacon were of different Orders, as our Adversaries do allow, but also a Bishop and Presbyter; for according to St. *Chrysostom*, though there
were

were many Presbyters in one City, yet there were not many Bishops. And indeed, though the Names were not fixed and determin'd in the beginning, yet the Orders, and Offices were. And I challenge any one to shew any Church for many Hundred of Years after Christ, which was not govern'd by a Succession of Bishops, as Superiour to Presbyters. And 'tis worth our observing, That some of the most learned of our Adversaries do themselves in effect confess this, whilst convinced by the evidence of Truth, they are forced to acknowledge, that Episcopal Government was establish'd throughout the Universal Church soon after the Apostles time. For since no tolerable account can be given, how so great a change of Government could happen in the Church so universally and in so short a time, as by their own confession did; it makes it more than probable, that no such change did ever happen, but that the Government of the Church was by Bishops, from the very times of the Apostles, and by their special Appointment. And so much for the first Head.

I proceed, now in the *Second* place, to consider the Subject Matter of the Exhortation :

tation: *Take heed unto your selves, and to all the Flock.* It consists of two parts, both which I shall consider in their Order.

First, *Take heed unto your selves.* The Apostle has not given us the express meaning of this Phrase here; however we may easily collect it out of his Epistles to *Timothy* and *Titus*, where we frequently find him exhorting them, to take care of their Lives and Conversations, and to behave themselves as becomes the Preachers of so Holy an Institution. Thus 1 Tim. 4. ver. 12. *Be thou an Example of the Believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in purity;* Which Advice he summs up briefly in the 16 ver. using the same expression with that in my Text, *Take heed unto thy self.* And in his Epistle to *Titus* he exhorts him to shew himself a *pattern of good Works.* 'Tis plain then that the sense of the Apostle's Advice in this place is, That a Minister should take heed to lead an Holy Life. This he is obliged to, not only upon the account of his own Salvation, but also in order to carry on the Work of his Ministry successfully. For though the wickedness of a Minister, as
our

our Church declares in her Articles, doth not hinder the effect of God's Ordinances upon those that duly partake of them, and to separate from a Church rightly Constituted according to Christ's Will upon this pretence, is not lawful; yet it must be own'd, that the behaviour of a Minister, whether good or bad has great Power either to help or hinder the advancement of Religion. I shall only instance in two or three Advantages of a good Minister. The *First* is, That he thereby takes the best Course to avoid being contemned. Though our Holy Profession may be hated by some profligate Wretches, and a Minister may be despised purely upon that account; yet, commonly speaking, if his behaviour *be such as becomes the Gospel of Christ*, he will in a good measure be above Contempt amongst the generality of People. For Men are not so bad, but that a prudent, and steady course of Virtue will find some Respect and Esteem among them. But if he be as Worldly, and Sensual as the rest of Mankind are; if Lust, or Covetousness, or Ambition govern him, no wonder if he meet with Contempt from Men. If a Minister forgets the excellency

of his Profession, that he is the Servant of the Most High GOD, and his Son CHRIST JESUS, can he wonder if others should forget it too, and instead of treating him with that respect which is due to his Character use him with Reproach and Contumely; so necessary is that advice of St. Paul to Timothy to be observed by him; *Let no man despise thee, but be thou an Example to the Believers.*

But *Secondly*, He thereby adds Weight and Authority to his Instructions. The Christian Religion indeed stands upon a sure Foundation, is supported by the strongest and clearest Arguments, urges Men to the practice of the most amiable Virtues, by the most prevalent Motives; so that a Minister has great advantages in order to convince Men, and to persuade them to their Duty, and to stop the Mouths of Gainsayers: But yet if his Life be wicked, these very Arguments lose much of their force, they do not appear so strong as otherwise they would. For Men are apt to be shockt with the gross Contradiction, which they discern to be between his Life and Doctrine; and the stronger his Arguments against
Sin

Sin are, still the more they must be confounded to consider, That he who can represent the dangerous condition of an impenitent Sinner so lively, and seems so sensible of the Punishment which such must undergo, can yet act in defiance of all this, and live in the habitual practice of those Sins, to which with his own Mouth he owns damnation to be due. Hence it comes to pass that good Men are offended, and bad Men are hardened; of such consequence it is, that Ministers should follow the Apostle's Doctrine, and take heed to themselves and their Lives and Conversations.

But *Thirdly*, He lets Men see that Religion is not only a reasonable, but a practicable Institution too. Nothing frights Men more from a serious application to Religion, than the difficulty they apprehend to be in it. They are apt to be soon discouraged, and after some few attempts made in vain, to conclude it an impossible Task; and are often thereby tempted either to neglect it wholly, or else to flie to those, who will prescribe them an easier way to Heaven, than the Reformation of their Lives. But a good Minister

Minister shews how unreasonable these Mens proceedings are, he gives them a sensible Demonstration how falsely they urge the impossibility of being good ; and by the conformity of his own Life to his Doctrine (who is one of like Passions with them) lets them see that the fault is in themselves, and that there is no difficulty in Religion, but what they may overcome, if they will but use the means with that industry and application of Mind, which a business of such moment requires.

So much for the First part of the Exhortation, *Take heed to your selves* : I proceed now to the Second part, *Take heed to all the Flock*. The Apostle exhorts them, First to take heed to themselves, and then to the Flock, because the former is of so great Moment toward the due discharging of the latter, that it is not very easie to imagine, how any one should take such care of CHRIST's Flock as he ought, who is negligent of his own Salvation. It would be too tedious as well as unnecessary for me to run through all the particulars, wherein the Duty of a Pastor consists ; but since my Text leads me to it, I shall
beg

beg leave briefly to touch upon two things :

1st. A Minister must be sure after *St. Paul's* Example, to deliver to his People the whole Counsel of God. He must not forbear to teach any necessary Doctrine, or to reprove any Vice ; if he doth, he is unfaithful to his Trust, and betrays the Souls that are committed to him. Some Gospel Doctrines are very ungrateful to some People ; and some Vices are so kept in Countenance by the Authority of Great Ones, as in a manner to be above reproof ; but Fidelity in our Office requires that we should neither omit preaching up the one, nor reproofing the other : And he, who out of Fear or Shame, or Worldly Interest neglects to do so, greatly offends God, and is unworthy of the high Character wherewith he is honour'd. He certainly is very unfit to be an Ambassador of Christ's, who has not Courage or Fidelity enough to deliver the Things his Lord and Master has given him in Commission. It is possible that it may happen to a Minister now as it did to *St. Paul* formerly ; and Men may become his Enemies, because he tells them
the

the Truth; nay, perhaps may forsake the Church's Communion upon that score, and chuse to themselves Teachers who will Prophecie smother Things to them: Yet this must by no means hinder him from delivering these Truths; 'tis his Duty to do it, and he must leave the Event to God; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, he clears his own Soul from Guilt; and if they perish, their Blood will be upon their own Heads.

But, *2dly*. As a Minister must take heed to deliver to his People the whole Counsel of God; so likewise he must embrace all Opportunities of doing it in his private Conversation with them, as well as in his Sermons and Catechisings. Manifold are the Advantages of Instructing and Reproving Men, which private Conversation offers to a Minister: For People are not at all times equally disposed to receive Instruction; at some times they are in a more serious Temper than others, and their Ears are more open to Discipline, which times may be easily improved to the promoting of Religion and the Interest of Mens Souls. Thus should a Minister

nister endeavour in some sort to imitate the Apostle's practice, and teach not only publickly but from House to House.

I might pursue this Head much further, but I shall rather chuse to spend the remaining time in making an Application, which shall be to exhort you, as the Apostle doth the *Ephesians*, to take heed unto your selves, and to all the Flock. And though I might enforce this Exhortation by many weighty Considerations which *St. Paul* suggests to me, such as are the value of the Souls committed to our Charge, so valuable as to be the purchase of the precious Blood of CHRIST; and the certainty of our appearance before the great Shepherd to give an Account how we have discharg'd our Duty; yet at present I shall rather chuse to insist upon that Argument which *St. Paul* makes use of immediately after my Text, as also in the last Chapter of his second Epistle to *Timothy*, which is drawn from the Consideration of the perillous Times we live in; for an abundance of False Prophets are gon out into the World, and Men are risen up among us, speaking perverse Things to draw away Disciples after them;

and our People are but too forward to give Ear to them, and to receive every one as a Divine Messenger who has but confidence enough to tell them that GOD has sent him. The Words of St. *Paul* to *Timothy* are the very Character and Description of our Age ; *The time will come when they will not endure sound Doctrine, but after their own Lusts shall they heap to themselves Teachers.* Have we not here, as in a Glass, our own Nation represented to the Life ? For will our People endure sound Doctrine ? For Instance, Preach to them the necessity of an Holy Life ; shew them from the very Words of CH R I S T and his Apostles, that Obedience is necessarily required as a Condition of our Salvation ; and that sound Doctrine is in St. *Paul's* sense the Doctrine which is after Godliness ; and that a saving Faith is that which worketh by Love, produceth a sincere Obedience to Christ's Commandments, which is the genuine fruit of Love, and will they endure it ? Will they not tell you, you have not the Spirit of the Christian Religion, you Preach up the Law, and not the Gospel ; and will they not be apt to turn away after those who are
ever

ever entertaining them with the Merits
 CHRIST's Death and the eternal Sal-
 vation He has purchased for them
 (which is indeed the only Foundati-
 on of all our hopes) but seldom take
 notice of what the Apostle teaches us,
 that he is the Author of eternal Salva-
 tion to them that obey him. It is very
 far from my Design to reckon up all the
 Particulars contrary to sound Doctrine,
 wherein they are fallen that dissent from
 our Church; but one I cannot but
 take notice of, as being the main
 Thing whereby our People are seduced
 from us, to wit, a pretence which they
 make to greater measures of the Holy
 Spirit than is now promised in the Go-
 spel. This is an Error of dangerous
 Consequence, and is entertain'd by most
 of them that dissent from us, though
 not in the same degree. 'Tis held in
 the lowest degree by those who prefer
 Extemporary Prayers to Forms upon this
 Account, that they have something more
 Spiritual in them, are more the Work of
 the Holy Ghost; and it is improved to its
 height in Quakerism, where every one
 seems to claim to himself such a Title to
 GOD's Spirit, as makes him equal at

least to, if not greater than the Apostles themselves. And as they will not endure sound Doctrine but run after Errors, so do they not heap unto themselves Teachers? For do they not chuse to themselves Men for their Instructors, who have no Authority or Commission from C H R I S T to preach the Gospel, and oftentimes as little Ability to do it? For what is the Commission that many of them pretend to but only this; that they are inwardly moved to it? Now if by being inwardly moved they mean any extraordinary impulse of God's Spirit upon them, they must give us leave to doubt of it till we have better proof than their own bare Words for it. But if they mean only an inclination to Preach, then, I say, though they are never so strongly inclin'd to it, and were moreover well qualified for this Work (as commonly they are not) yet all this doth not give them sufficient Authority to act as Ministers. For the being able and willing to execute an Office doth no more give one a Right and Title to it in the Church than in the State; and one eminently vers'd in the Law might as reasonably set up to be

be a Judge without a Commission, as one well skill'd in the Gospel to be a publick Teacher without being lawfully appointed thereto ; seeing then notwithstanding the Apostle's Question, *How shall they Preach except they be sent ?* Many thrust themselves into the Ministry, whence it comes to pass that abundance of Errors are daily spread among us, and our People are in danger of being seduced from our Communion ; it behoves us to be upon our guard, and to watch over our Flocks with all Diligence. We should, as St. Paul advises Timothy, *Preach the Word, be instant in Season, out of Season, Reprove, Rebuke, Exhort with all Long-suffering and Doctrine.* We should resolutely maintain the Truth without Fear or base Compliance. We should testify against the reigning Evils of the times both in Doctrines and Manners. Particularly we should seriously lay before our People the great Sin of Schism, and the Obligation that lies upon them from the Gospel to *keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace ;* and how much soever they may look upon themselves to be at liberty to follow their

their own Humours, and how Innocent soever it may seem to them, to run after every one that sets up for a Teacher; yet let them know, that that Apostolical Precept is still in force, *Obey those that have the Rule over you, for they watch for your Souls*; and that the Ministers of the established Church are now those Persons to whom this Obedience in Spiritual Things is due by the Law of God. For since their Call to the Ministry is in all things agreeable to the Will of CHRIST; and the Church they are appointed to Officiate in, is constituted according to the same Will of CHRIST; all Christians of this Nation are obliged to continue Members of this Church, to hold constant Communion with it, and to pay such Obedience to the Ministers of it, as is due by the Law of CHRIST to Gospel Ministers. And as we should thus instruct them in this great Duty, so should we take Care that neither by the Viciousness of our Lives, or Negligence in our Callings, we give Offence to weak Brethren, and alienate their Minds from our Communion. For though this will not justify

stifie them who leave the Church upon this Account ; yet it will greatly aggravate our Guilt, and that most grievous Wo will belong to us, which our Saviour has denounced against such as offend those little Ones that believe in him : Which that it may never be denounced against any of us, let us humbly beg of God, for JESUS CHRIST's sake. *Amen.*

F I N I S.

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